

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver. This can be caused by alcohol and some drugs, but usually it is the result of a viral infection. There are many types of virus which can cause hepatitis. Each of these viruses acts differently.

The hepatitis C virus (HCV) can be spread in the following ways:

- by sharing contaminated needles or other drug-injecting equipment. If you have **ever** shared drug-injecting equipment, you may want to be tested for hepatitis C
- by using non-sterilised equipment for tattooing, acupuncture or body piercing
- by unprotected (without a condom) penetrative sex (when the penis enters the anus or vagina) with someone who is infected. Also by sex which draws blood with someone who is infected. This is not a common way of becoming infected with hepatitis C
- on rare occasions, from an infected mother to her baby, mainly during delivery. The risk may be greater if the mother is also infected with HIV
- through a blood transfusion in a country where blood is not tested for the hepatitis C virus. All blood for transfusion in the UK is tested.

Signs and symptoms

People may have no symptoms at all, but they can still pass on the virus to others. Symptoms, though not common, may include:

- a short, mild, flu-like illness
- nausea and vomiting
- diarrhoea

- loss of appetite
- weight loss
- jaundice (yellow skin and whites of eyes, darker yellow urine and pale faeces)
- itchy skin.

Some people may need to be admitted to hospital.

Current evidence suggests that only about 20% of individuals who have been infected with the hepatitis C virus appear to clear the virus from the blood, whilst about 80% will remain infected and can pass on the virus to others. If a person continues to be infected over a number of years with the hepatitis C virus, they could develop the following complications:

- chronic hepatitis
- liver cirrhosis
- liver cancer

Where to go for help

- Your own GP.
- Your local NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic.

You can find details of your nearest NHS sexual health clinic in the phone book under genito-urinary medicine (GUM), sexually transmitted diseases (STD) or venereal diseases (VD). Or phone your local hospital and ask for the 'special' or GUM clinic. Or check our Lovelife web

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site (www.lovelife.uk.com) for a directory of GUM clinics in the UK.

You will get free, confidential advice and treatment. You can go to any NHS clinic anywhere in the country – you don't have to go to a local one – and you don't have to be referred by your GP. (Non-NHS sexual health clinics may not always offer the full range of services which are available at NHS sexual health clinics.)

- A hospital Accident and Emergency department.

The tests for hepatitis C

Tests for the hepatitis C virus (HCV) have only been available since 1989.

Your GP or doctor at your local NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic can diagnose hepatitis C by carrying out blood tests. You will be asked questions to try to discover the source of the infection.

What does a **positive** test result mean?

It means that you may be a carrier of the hepatitis C virus and can pass it on to others.

The first test given will be a test for **antibodies** to the hepatitis C virus (**anti-HCV**). If this test is positive, it means that you have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus and that your body has responded by producing antibodies. This test does not indicate whether or not you are still infected. You will normally be referred on to a specialist for a further test to try to find out if this is the case.

The specialist will carry out another blood test to look for the hepatitis C virus (**HCV-RNA**). Although some people do clear hepatitis C, most people remain chronically infected and are therefore infectious to others. To find out how much hepatitis C may be affecting the liver, the specialist will also perform liver function tests (**LFT**) and may also take a small sample of liver tissue (a liver biopsy). The results of the LFT and/or liver biopsy help the specialist decide whether you would benefit from treatment or not.

Clearing the virus does not mean you are immune to reinfection.

What does a **negative** test result mean?

This result probably means that you have never been in contact with the hepatitis C virus.

However, as the tests rely on the detection of antibodies to HCV, and the antibodies can take some months to develop, your doctor may advise you to have a repeat test if there is a chance you have been recently exposed to the virus.

At present there is no vaccine available to protect against hepatitis C.

Follow-up

If you are diagnosed as having an active infection with hepatitis C, you will be advised to have regular blood tests and physical check-ups.

All carriers should expect to be referred to specialist services.

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If you are infected with hepatitis C, you should limit the amount of alcohol you drink. The doctor may also advise you to avoid fatty foods and follow a low-salt diet.

Transmission of the hepatitis C virus by penetrative sex does occur, although it is not common. If you are infected it is advisable to use a condom for penetrative sex to ensure that you do not pass on the virus to your partner(s).

Your doctor will advise you about any precautions necessary to ensure that you avoid infecting others with the virus, such as not sharing toothbrushes or shaving equipment.

Remember, using a condom can reduce your risk of getting or passing on sexually transmitted infections.

Further information

For further information, visit the British Liver Trust website at www.britishlivertrust.org.uk, or write to British Liver Trust, Ransomes Europark, Ipswich, IP3 9QG, or call Mainliners Helpline on 020 7582 5226. Information on hepatitis C is also available from NHS Direct on 0845 46 47.

This factsheet is one of a series which give information on the following range of infections and diseases: bacterial vaginosis, chlamydia, cystitis, genital herpes, genital warts, gonorrhoea, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, non-specific urethritis, penile cancer, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), prostate cancer, pubic lice, scabies, syphilis, testicular cancer, thrush and trichomonas vaginalis.

Alternatively, free copies of any of these factsheets are available from GP surgeries, NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics, or your local health promotion unit (in the phone book under your local Health Authority).



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